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Is a Fitbit a Diary? Self-Tracking and Autobiography

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> Data becomes something of a mirror in which people see themselves reflected. (Sorapure 270)

In a 2014 essay for *The New Yorker*, the humourist David Sedaris recounts an obsession spurred by the purchase of a Fitbit, a wearable activity-tracker that sends a celebratory "tingle" to his wrist every 10, 000 steps. He starts "[o]ing out" modestly but is soon working hard, steadily improving on the manufacturer's recommended

baseline. “But why?” asks Sedaris’ partner Hugh: “Why isn’t twelve thousand enough?” “Because,” I told him, “my Fitbit thinks I can do better” (n.p.).

The record of daily, incidental activity that the Fitbit collects and visualises is important to Sedaris as a record of his (increasing) bodily fitness but it is also evidence in another way, a testament to virtue and a correlate of *self*-improvement: “The tingle feels so good,” Sedaris says, “not just as a sensation but also as a mark of accomplishment” (n.p.). Improvement is presented as both traceable and quantifiable; data and self are inextricably, though also ironically, linked. With his Fitbit, Sedaris accesses new and precise degrees of bodily information and he connects himself to a visible community of wearers. At first, Sedaris is smug and optimistic; by the time he begins “rambling” compulsively, however, and achieving his “first sixty-thousand-step day,” he has also had an epiphany: “I staggered home with my flashlight knowing that I’d advance to sixty-five thousand, and that there will be no end to it until my feet snap off at the ankles. Then it’ll just be my jagged bones stabbing into the soft ground” (n.p.). When the device finally “dies,” Sedaris experiences an immediate feeling of freedom; within five hours he has “ordered a replacement, express delivery” (n.p.).

In their book *Self-Tracking,* Gina Neff and Dawn Nafus note that both digital technology and a turn to biomedicalisation in the broader culture have amplified the capacity and reach of quantification practices in everyday life. Wearable activity trackers, of which the Fitbit is arguably the most iconic, offer individuals the ability to track minute or previously imperceptible permutations of bodily sensation within an everyday and non-medical context. It is a technological capacity, however, thoroughly embedded in a mobilising rhetoric of “health,” a term which itself has “become a loaded word, not merely a description of a bodily state but also a euphemism for what the speaker believes is desirable” (Neff and Nafus 19). The Fitbit measures movement, but it also signals something about the wearer’s identity that is framed, in the device’s marketing at least, in positive and desirable terms as an indication of character, as a highly desirable aspect of self.

In a recent discussion of new forms of online life writing, Madeline Sorapure argues that acts of interpretation and representation in relation to biometric data are “something very similar to autobiographical practice. As in autobiography, subject and object, measurer and measured, are collapsed” (270). In its capacity to track and document over time and its affective role in forming a particular experience of self, the Fitbit bears a formal resemblance to autobiographical practice and specifically to modes of serial self-representation like diaries, journals, or almanacs. The discursive context is crucial here too. Early self-trackers use the pre-formatted almanac diary or calendar to better organise their time and to account for expenditure or gain. The pocket calendar was an innovation that had mass-market appeal and its rapid circulation in the early twentieth century directly shaped diary and account-keeping habits amongst historical populations, and to this day (McCarthy). Such forms are not simply passive repositories but bear cultural ideology. As popular templates for practices of accounting, self-documentation, and affecting, pocket calendars shape what content an individual across their individual day or week is coaxed to attend to or record, and effects what might then be relegated “marginal” or less consequential in relation.

How do the technological affordances of the Fitbit similarly coax and shape self-knowledge or ideas of value and worth in relation to personal experience? What kinds of formal and discursive and resonance might there be drawn between wearable personal devices like the Fitbit and historical forms of tracking self-experience, like the diary? Is a Fitbit a diary? In this discussion, I consider pre-formatted diaries, like the almanac or pocket calendar, as discursive and technological precursors or adjuncts to wearable personal trackers like the Fitbit and I explore some assertions around the kinds of subject that digital forms and modes of self-tracking and personal data might t[illegible]seem to coax or imagine.

Tracking Selves

> Self-tracking is a human activity, one far more interesting than the gadgets that have made it easier and far more widespread. (Neff and Nafus 2)

In 1726, at the age of 20, the inventor and polymath Benjamin Franklin recorded in his journal the inception of a plan to improve his character. In a chart created to track goals of virtue and progress in character, "black marks" are literal and symbolic, denoting when he has failed to live up to his expectations—two black marks represent a particularly bad effort (Rettberg 438). At age 79, Franklin was still tracking his progress when he wrote about the project in his *Autobiography*:

> It was about this time I conceived the bold and arduous project of arriving at moral perfection. I wished to live without committing any fault at any time; I would conquer all that either natural inclination, custom, or company might lead me into. (89)

Franklin's desire to document and chronicle the self-conscious development of his character drives his interest in the form. He was as an almanac devotee and an innovative publisher of the form, which gained immense popularity at this time. Franklin added blank pages to the almanacs he helped produce in the mid eighteenth century and this addition expanded the possibilities for the kinds of data that might be recorded, particularly personal and anecdotal material. The innovation also earned the publishers a good deal more money (McCarthy 49). The mass production of printed almanacs thus had a profound effect on how individuals engaged in various kinds of daily and temporal and social regulation and documentation, including of the self:

> At the same time as it kept readers aware of the outside world, the almanac could also direct them to the state of their own being. Almanacs were all about regulation, inside and out. Almanacs displayed a regulated universe governed by the laws of planetary motion, by the church calendar, by the zodiac. It seemed natural, then, that some readers might turn to an almanac to regulate themselves. What better way to do that than in a text that already possessed its own system? All one had to do was insert one's own data in that printed form, like connecting the dots. (McCarthy 53)

Mass-market forms that engender habits of accounting are also cultural templates: pre-formatted journals are systems for private documentation that reflect broader cultural and social ideologies. Rebecca Connor observes that historical gender assumptions in relation to time "well-spent" are frequently visible in eighteenth-century mass-market journals explicitly aimed at women, which tended to allocate more space for "social" engagements versus, for example, financial accounting (18).

In the twenty-first century, technologies like the Fitbit promise access to data in relation to personal experience but they also reveal dominant cultural and social attitudes to bodies and selves. Deborah Lupton argues that self-tracking as a phenomenon is essentially connected to specific ideological imperatives: "Underlying many accounts of self-tracking is a barely hidden discourse of morality, which takes the form of championing those who take action to improve themselves" (74). Within these influential discourses, acts of self-tracking, no less than Franklin's virtue chart, acquire significance as moral activities and as the outward sign of good character.

Neither self-tracking nor the ideology of virtue that underwrites it are new phenomena. In their cultural study of weight measurement devices, Kate Crawford, Jessa Lingl, and Tero Karpii have explored how both weight scales and wearable devices "emphasize self-knowledge and control through external measurements" (479). Similarly, Lupton has noted that, the "metrics" generated by personal self-tracking devices are "invested with significance" because "data visualisation" is "viewed as more credible and accurate by participants than the 'subjective' assessments of their bodily sensations" ("Personal Data" 345).

In various historical cultures, objectivity about one's self is seen as a desire (if not a fact) in relation to conscious self-examination; externalisation, through written or oral confession, is both a virtue and a discipline. While diary writing is, particularly in popular culture, often derided as an overly subjective and narcissistic mode, the diary is also framed within contexts of therapy, or spiritual development, as a possible methodology for self-improvement. For Puritans, though, the act was also understood to entail risks; recording one's thoughts into a written journal could enable the individual to see patterns or faults in everyday behaviour, and so to identify and rectify habits of mind holding back personal spiritual development. In the twentieth century, "how-to write a diary" self-help guidebooks remediate the discourse of self-knowledge as self-improvement, and promised to refine the method, advising adherents on the kinds of writing practices that might best circumvent problems of individual bias or subjectivity (a claim of an ever-more objective methodology that reverberates to the current moment). Invariably, the more "unconscious" the diary writing practice, the greater the assumed potential for "objective" knowledge (Cardell 34).

Contemporary practices of self-tracking extend the prioritisation of external, objective measurement in relation to documenting personal experience. Crawford, Lingel, and Karppi observe that "the discourse around wearable devices gives the impression of radical new technology offering precise and unambiguous physical assessment: devices that reflect back the 'real' state of the body" (480). The technology, of course, is not new but it is "improved." The ideal of a better, more accurate (because externalised and so auditable by the community) self-knowledge sought by Puritans in their journals, or by Benjamin Franklin in his charts and almanacs, resurfaces in the contemporary context, in which wearables like the Fitbit assume powerful discursive status in relation to ideals of truth and objectivity and where the individual is decentred from the position of as "the most authoritative source of data about themselves" (Crawford, Lingel, and Karppi 479).

Data Selves

What kind of selves do people develop in relation to the technology they use to record or visualise their experience? "There is no doubt," writes Jill Walker Rettberg, in *Seeing Our Selves through Technology*, "that people develop 'affective ties' to the data they track, just as diaries, blogs, photo albums and other material archives are meaningful to those who keep them" (87). That the data is numerical, or digital, does not lessen this connection:

> Apps which allow us to see our data allow us to see ourselves. We look at our data doubles as we gazed into the mirror as teenagers wondering who we were and who we might be. We look at our data in much the same way as you might flick through your selfies to find the one that shows you the way you want to be seen. (Rettberg 87)

Crucially, Rettberg sees data as both affective and agential and she observes that data can also be edited and shaped by the individual. Some of this practice is deliberate, taking the form of an engagement with narrative as a "" of self that underpins the practice of writing autobiography, for example. However, the representation of self can also be more oblique. "The first writing" says Rettberg, "was developed not to record words and sentences but

to keep accounts. Arguably, recording quantities of grain or other valuables can be a form of self-representation, or at least representation of what belongs to the self" (10).

Like log-books or field notebooks, like calendars or almanacs—prosaic forms of daily sequential recording that are understood to prioritise information capture over self-reflection—the Fitbit is usually presented as a method for accruing and representing personal *data*. In contemporary digital culture, "data" is a complex and fraught term and recent debates around "big data," which describes the capacity of machines to make connections and perform calculations that a human might not necessarily notice or be able to perform, has crystallised this. What Melissa Gregg calls the power and "spectacle" of data is an ideological pivot in digital cultures of the twenty-first century, one that turns in conjunction to discourses of evidence and authority that emerge in relation to the visual: "sharing the same root as 'evidence,' vision is the word that aligns truth and knowledge in different historical moments" (3).

For autobiography scholars exploring how formal modes of capture might also be *genres*, or how a Fitbit might coax a narrative of self, these questions are formative. Sorapure says:

> Information graphics that visually represent personal data; collaboratively constructed and template-based self-representations in social media and networking sites; the non-narrative nature of aggregated life writing: in these and other new practices we see selves emerging and being represented through interactions with technologies. (271)

In the twenty-first century, self-quantification and tracking technologies like the Fitbit are ever more present in individual spheres of everyday activity. These devices prompt behaviour, affect self-knowledge, and signal identity: *I am a fit person, or trying to be, or was*. A Fitbit cannot record how it *feels* to spend 34 minutes in the "peak zone," but it can prompt recollection, it is a mnemonic, and it provides an account of time spent, how, and by whom. Is a Fitbit a diary? The diary in the twenty-first century is already vastly different to many of its formal historical counterparts, yet there are discursive resonances. The Fitbit is a diary if we think of a diary as a chronological record of data, which it can be. However, contemporary uses of the diary, just like their historical antecedents, are also far more diverse and complex than this.

Crucially, the Fitbit, like the diary, signals identity in relation to experience and so it reflects various and shifting cultural values or anxieties over what is worth measuring or documenting, and conversely, over what is not. "The private diary," as Lejeune asserts, is a way of life: "the text itself is a mere by-product, a residue" (31). Historical diary keeping practices unfold from and emerge within cultures that position self-expression and its documentation of this as a means to self-improvement. Seeing the Fitbit within this tradition draws attention to the discursive ideology behind self-tracking as a personal practice that nonetheless positions itself in relation to cultural norms and to ideals (such as health, or fitness, or conscientiousness, or goodness).

Conclusion

What kind of self-representation is produced by practices of self-quantification, where personal data is amassed continuously and contiguously to individual experience? The legacy of centuries of historical diary-practice has been evident to various scholars exploring the cultures of self-tracking that are evolving in response to wearable technologies like the Fitbit. In her book length study of self-tracking cultures, *The Quantified Self*, Lupton observes that "self-tracking tools" are inevitably "biographical and personal" and that "contemporary self-tracking tools and r[illegible]ds are the latter-day versions of the paper diary or journal, photo album, keepsake and memento box or personal dossier" (73). While, in *Self-Tracking,* Neff and Nafus argue that new technologies "intersect with the way

that people have self-tracked for centuries like keeping diaries or logs. The growth of these digital traces raises new questions about this old practice" (2).

What does it mean to think of wearable technology like Fitbits in relation to diaries, and what are the implications of such a conception? Privacy settings allow the Fitbit to comply with popular stereotypes of diaries that exist in popular culture; that is, as a locked or secret record. However, in the case of wearable technology the content is in the form of data. While data often poses as neutral and objective *information*, seeing this instead as diaristic can draw valuable attention to dominant cultural ideals that shape value in relation to self and technology in the twenty-first century. Crucially, "while self-knowledge may be the rhetoric of wearable device advertising, it is just as much a technology of *being known by others*" (Crawford, Lingel, and Karppi 493-494).

Is my Fitbit a diary? It tracks my body's movements and gestures and reports them to the conscious self. It stores chronologically accumulated data over time. It enables self-reflection and the visualisation of a set of daily habits, and it may produce or coax new behaviour. Diaries have long performed this function: tracking, recording and, documenting for making sense of later, on reflection, or after enough time has passed.

Contemporary advances in technology related to self-tracking and personal data collection make possible a new range of previously unimaginable information in relation to individual experience. However, the diary's cultural status as a "confessional" form intersects with exigencies around "health" and "self-improvement" that corporations producing devices like Fitbit promote to their customers in ways that will demand further attention.

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